

# Sherman County started to decline after 1960

By Tom Betz

The Goodland Star-News  
nt.betz@nwkansas.com

Sherman County population figures reflect the slow decline seen around northwest Kansas, with an estimated loss of about 14 percent over the past 10 years, and projections for further declines through 2030, with the county losing up to 43 percent of its population and falling below 4,000.

The projections are part of an annual report published by the University of Kansas Institute for Policy and Social Research in May. The estimated population figures for 2010 to 2030 were produced for the report by Wichita State University in 2008.

Census figures for 2010 are being tallied, but won't be published until December. Sherman County did not meet the Kansas average for returning the 2010 Census forms of 75 percent or the national average of 72 percent, falling to 64 percent for the 2010 Census. The return rate for Sherman County in 2000 was 76 percent. Goodland results were similar.

Voltaire Township had the highest return with 74 percent, and Logan Township had a 72 percent rate. Itasca Township had 66 percent and McPherson Township 64. Townships lower than the average were Grant (62 percent), Stateline (58 percent), Washington (55 percent) and the Llanos (36 percent).

Population projections for Sherman County

## Sherman County Population

Population now – 5,519  
Population one year ago – 5,860  
Population five years ago – 6,064  
Population 10 years ago – 6,746  
Population 50 years ago – 6,682  
Trend – Dropping an average of 23 people a year.

for 2010 show a total of 5,519, down from the 6,760 reported in 2000 for a drop of about 18 percent in 10 years. The estimate published by the Kansas Department of Labor shows a loss of about 2.6 percent in the past year.

Sherman County hit the 20th century with a modest population of 3,341. The county grew pretty rapidly over the next 30 years, more than doubling to 7,400 in 1930. At this time, the county had 14 percent of the area's inhabitants and seemed destined to continue the climb. However, Mother Nature had different ideas.

As the winds of the 30s began to blow, the population slipped to 6,421 in 1940. It did a bit of a see-saw over the next three decades, rising to 7,373 in 1950; falling to 6,682 in 1960; and rising to its highest level of 7,792 in 1970.



A worker from Commercial Sign of Colby installed and wired the new electronic signboard for the Northwest Technical College at K-27 and U.S. 24.

— Photo by Tom Betz/The Goodland Star-News

Over the past 30 years, Sherman County has seen a slow decline down to 6,760 in the 2000 figures. Based on the projections the county's population will continue to fall, dropping to 4,193 by 2025 and below the 4,000 mark (3,853) by 2030.

In the first 70 years of the 20th century, Sherman County grew by 57 percent. In the last 40, the drop has been about 29 percent, but the county remains almost 100 percent ahead of where it started the 20th century.

One of the stabilizing forces continues to

be Goodland's location along Interstate 70 and on K-27. In recent years, development of the area as a large player in sunflower production for both oil and confectionery uses has expanded the agriculture base. The end of a drought that lasted about eight years during the 1990s has brought a return of good wheat and corn crops in the past few years.

Another positive influence has been the continued expansion and development of the Northwest Kansas Technical College, which began more than 40 years ago.

## Goodland area saw boom, bust cycles as population varied

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Sherman County has seen several boom-and-bust cycles in the past 50 years, with the population rising to the highest historic level in the 1970s and '80s, but the numbers have been falling over the past 30 years.

Historically, the county population grew to 7,400 in 1930, but the bust of the Dust Bowl dragged the number back down until 1950, when the count rose to 7,343. The census fell again in 1960. In 1970, Sherman County hit a historic record population with 7,792, and it was close to that in 1980 at 7,759.

Today Sherman County's estimated population is 5,519 and the projections are for more decline in the next 20 years.

Efforts to stem the tide have been marginally successful. The City of Goodland has been working with the Sherman County Economic Development Council to bring a grocery to the county seat to help revitalize its downtown.

The city purchased the old Mosburg IGA store on Center Ave., north of the City Administration Building, after it was damaged in a May 1999 fire, with the idea of expanding city offices. However, California-based Aircraft Seal and Gasket Co. approached the city in 2003 about relocating to Goodland. The city put several hundred thousand dollars

into renovating the old grocery to house the company.

When it became apparent Aircraft Seal and Gasket was not going to become a reality the city was approached in the spring of 2005 to lease the same building to a branch of Adronics from Hays to expand its auto-antenna manufacturing production. The Adronics plant had about 45 to 60 employees before the bottom fell out of the auto market in 2008, and by 2009 it had closed.

The Economic Development Council, created in 2003, has been working with Sam Mancini of Village Markets for about 10 months about opening a grocery store in the old IGA building.

The city put together a package of incentives for Mancini, but those do not kick in until he actually begins remodeling the building. So far, the work has been delayed from April to August, and now it may be pushed back to spring.

A group of local investors put together a vision of an energy center to be built out at Caruso, west of Goodland, with a coal-fired power, ethanol and biodiesel plants. The group broke ground in April 2005 on two of the three plants. Over the next two years, slow progress could be seen as the power and ethanol plants grew up on the hill above the Northern Sun sunflower plant.

Lack of money stalled the project and it has been dormant for the past two years. Some are convinced it will never be finished, but others are optimistic an investor can be found to

finance the finishing of the ethanol plant and possibly the power plant.

The Technical College grew up over the past 40 years from humble beginnings as an area vocational-technical school in the mid 1960s. The school started in a single building leased from the Goodland School District. Today the campus has more than 20 buildings and more than 16 programs, including diesel technology, auto collision repair, communications, carpentry, respiratory therapy, cosmetology and heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

In December, the state announced the closing of the Goodland National Guard Armory, and a citizen group recommended the building be turned over to Northwest Tech to house an aircraft maintenance program in collaboration with Kansas State University at Salina.

Walmart came to Goodland in the summer of 1997, and has brought more shopping to the city and county. Over the past 50 years the business community has changed as more fast food and motels have been built out on K-27 near the west I-70 interchange.

Agriculture continues to be the base for the county's economy, and predictions are for a record 20-million-bushel corn crop. Frontier Ag, a regional co-operative which grew out of the Goodland co-op, continues to expand, and the area has become an important sunflower production center.

A combination of irrigation and sugar beets created a great boom for the county and the area in the 1970s into the 80s. A sugar-beet plant was built at Caruso to handle the crop.

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